



LESSON 3 | A TIME FOR EVERYTHING (3:1-15)

In 1965, the folk rock group The Byrds hit number one on the charts with the song *Turn! Turn! Turn! (to Everything There is a Season)*. The Byrds did not write the song, however; it was copyrighted and first recorded by Pete Seeger in 1959. But even Pete Seeger did not write the entire song. Although he did change up the order of the words a bit, he took the words (all but six) from Ecclesiastes 3:1-8.

This passage is a poetic recognition that everything cycles in its time “under the heavens” (3:1). Now in chapter 3 the Teacher brings together both the big picture (the whole of life) and the individual parts (the seasons of life) and begins to explain why our lack of control over either is the very thing that can give us hope. Living well in God’s world means recognizing that when it comes to our own lives, we are not mini-gods. This is God’s creation, not ours. Things come and go and seasons change, and according to the Teacher, it is only God who knows exactly where everything is meant to go, in which order, and at what time.

There are many ways to embrace our finite condition, and nearly all of them involve thinking clearly about time. It is part of living well to accept that what we do comes and goes, but “whatever God does endures forever” (3:14). We are each developing the project of our lives, but as we do so, we are neither architect nor site manager. We are each writing the story of our lives, but we are not the main author. The Teacher states that the variety of times and seasons of life are set by God. All our hard work can never change the way God has established these patterns of life (3:9). All we can do is “be happy and do good” while we are alive (3:12). It is God’s gift for us to “eat, drink, and find satisfaction” in our work (3:13). We must simply enjoy God’s creation and understand that everything God has done is intended to lead us to worship and serve God (3:14).

The big idea of this text is to learn to be discerning about time, know what season you are in, trust that God is in it, and find a way to be happy and enjoy it with people we love.

The Poem (3:1-8)¹

To begin, notice how the poem expresses the beautiful complexity of life. Some of the opposites in the list can be grouped together into a basic pattern of bad times and good times. But not all seasons have an opposite that is definitively good or bad: there is a time to embrace and a time to refrain; there is a time to be silent and a time to speak. Each of these can be good when done at the right time in the right way. Others seem even more ambiguous: there is a time to search and a time to give up. Which one is favorable or unfavorable? Like the poem found in Ecclesiastes 1:2-11, the form of this poem is part of the meaning of its content: **life is complex, full of good times, hard times, in-between times, and a variety of choices and decisions that often require a wisdom that seems to escape us.** There is a time for every single one of these things.

¹ Excerpted from David Gibson, *Living Life Backward* (53-55)

Notice as well how the combined effect of the poem puts flesh on the fullness of a human life. **Almost every pair in the poem involves our connectedness to others between the moments of our birth and death. We are profoundly relational beings, and most of the seasons of our lives are taken up with navigating the different stages of our relationships and the effects they have on us.** We laugh together in moments of levity and we weep together in times of grief. We dance at a wedding and we mourn the loss of the one we danced with. There are those whom we naturally reach out and embrace, but we instinctively respect a different emotional and physical boundary with someone else. We grow to love the things that bring life to the people around us and come to hate the things that take life from them. If we were somehow to take the seasons of life out of the web of relationships in which we are enmeshed, our lives would become flat and monotonous.

More than this, the fact that there is no chronological sequence or discernible purpose to the order of each of these items is itself part of the Teacher's point that we have no control over any of these things. We make real, responsible decisions every single day, but in reality we each know that the seasons of life are almost completely out of our hands. There is a time for everything, but we are not arranging them on our stopwatch. *“Three hours for joy today, and next week I will have just twenty minutes of sorrow, please. Following that I will embark on an entirely new chapter of life with great success, and in two and a half years I will be happy to move on to something new.”* We all know life is not like this. So what can we do about it?

The Teacher's Observations (3:9-15)

It's meant to be a shock that the poetry of verses 1–8 is followed by the harsh reality of verse 9. The patterned order in the world doesn't lead us to find gain in the midst of it all. The rhythms rumble through our life, we find them happening to us often without our awareness of what is really going on, and the very fact that life keeps changing leaves us with no lasting success or feeling of deep satisfaction.

The message of Ecclesiastes is not "life is full of good times and bad times and so roll with the punches." Rather, the message is that life is full of good times and bad times that we cannot control, but the patterning of our lives in this way is part of a bigger pattern that God controls. It's not just that good follows bad, and bad follows good again, and that's the end of it. The point is that we can live within this pattern and accept not having all the answers to our times of difficulty and pain, yet. This is the key. So while we wait for future understanding, how then should we live?

Part of being wise in this world is learning to accept that we have only very limited access to the big picture. To be sure, we often want access to it—for God has “put eternity into man's heart”—but the point is that we “cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end” (3:11). God is not being unkind to us by not sharing it; the point is that we are not built to understand the big picture, precisely because we live in time and God does not. If we could see the end from the beginning, and understand how every life, season, and generation are all beautifully woven together, then we would be God.

This means that part of growing up in the world is learning to grow small. God intends us to be like children who trust their parents to know best because they can see what the children can't see, and they know what the children are not yet able to know. The relationship of trust, moreover, is built on the character of the parents. If the parents are good and wise and compassionate, then the child who cannot see the end from the beginning has nothing to fear.

Ecclesiastes tells us to learn now, today, that there really is a time for everything. Learning now that the season we are in will not always be the season of our life can at least help to prepare us for the chapters of our life God has yet to write. It doesn't mean the time to "give up" or "throw away" is going to be any easier when it comes, but it may help us not to be taken by surprise. Many of our frustrations rise from our blindness to the change of season or to the pain or joy of them, and we struggle to adjust our expectations. It's possible that actively embracing the reality of change in advance of change can help us to adjust a little bit more readily when autumn or winter comes upon us.

Living like this also helps us to realize that so often we use our times to seek satisfaction rather than living in the times God has given and receiving satisfaction from God as a gift. Satisfaction comes when we know we are time-bound and God is eternal. Satisfaction takes root in our heart when we accept the boundaries of our existence and accept that a good and loving God is always present amidst the seasons of our lives.

REFLECTIONS & CONNECTIONS TO JESUS

1. A Time For Everything.² As we read the various times and seasons of Ecclesiastes 3:1–15, we should remember that this is the rhythm of human life that Jesus experienced in his incarnation. Paul writes that at the appointed time, also called "the fullness of time," God sent his Son, Jesus, to this world (Gal 4:5).

Jesus was very much aware of the times set by God. He began his ministry by preaching, "*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near*" (Mark 1:15). During his ministry, when the authorities tried to arrest Jesus, John reports that "no one laid hands on him, because *his hour* had not yet come" (John 7:30). Jesus also knew that there was a time for his death. Shortly before his crucifixion, he told his disciples to "go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, 'The Teacher says, *My time is near*; I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples" (Matt 26:18).

Throughout his life Jesus experienced all the times and seasons that we experience today. One particular moment of Jesus' life (the death of Lazarus) encompasses several of the rhythms mentioned in Ecclesiastes 3. We read in John 11 that upon hearing the news, Jesus delays his response for two days so that Lazarus' death might find its "time" and might then be the means of Christ's glorification before his disciples.

Yet in the wake of this delay comes a torrent of grief and loss so palpable that Jesus himself is swept up in it. He calls for Mary, and so she comes, along with all those who loved Lazarus and now mourn his loss. We are twice told that Jesus, though strong and sure, is deeply moved in his spirit. He is deeply troubled as he comes face to face with grief and the reality of death. Other times and seasons are also in this episode: mourning time, binding of bandages time, saying farewell time, embracing time, and casting of stones time, as the stone seals the tomb of a man dead for four days. We even see Jesus himself in his weeping time. In every time and season under heaven, there he is.

Jesus is not too late, as Mary and Martha presumed. He is right on time. In Jesus' life we see God seeking out those parts of us that find it hard to hear, difficult to accept, and the parts that draw back out of fear or despair. In order to enter fully into the human condition, Jesus had to experience all the times and seasons we do, which includes enduring times of sadness and loss. Through Jesus, God the Father intimately

² Excerpted from Justin S. Holcomb, *Ecclesiastes* (30)

experiences the highest and lowest moments of human life. Indeed, God knows and understands our experiences from a first-person perspective. And through the Spirit, God is present with us in our own seasons, from laughter and dancing to mourning and weeping. **God is with us and walks beside us each step of the way.**

2. Knowing What To Do With Our Time.³ The way we spend our time is the way we spend our lives, and one of the best ways to avoid life's vanity is by knowing what to do with our time. Jesus calls us to make the best use of every moment, and as followers of Jesus we need to know what time it is, not measuring time merely in terms of hours and days but viewing the whole of our life's time as an opportunity to join in on what God is doing in the world. **There are at least three practical ways to apply this poem to our lives.**

– ***First, wait for God's time.*** The Teacher writes that God has “made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end” (3:11). The Teacher's wisdom invites us to live life from the perspective of eternity — recognizing that neither highs nor lows last, that harvest requires sowing, laughter can follow weeping, and silence can lead to speech.

David was able to ‘bless the Lord at all times’ (Ps. 34:1) because he knew that whatever time it was, God was still in control. Most of us would prefer to manage our own agenda, which makes us quick to criticize God's timing or forget altogether that God is the one in control. Instead of insisting on our own timetable, we ought to wait for God, as David did when he said, ‘I trust in you, Lord...My times are in your hand’ (Psalm 31:14-15).

– ***Second, live your life knowing that there is a time for you to die.*** The Teacher says this is one of the inevitable ‘times’ of life, and we are to recognize our own mortality in the face of God's eternity and be appropriately humbled: “I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him” (3:14).

The knowledge that our lives are fleeting and finite should lead us to both humility and a proper delight in the gifts of God. Acknowledging our own mortality can also enrich our appreciation for the fullness of life, or at the very least, teach us to find joy in the ordinary moments and seasons. As the Teacher observes, the art of finding joy in the ordinary is paired with the art of living in the presence of God. Because God is present, infusing each breath of creation with the renewing power of the Spirit, joy can be found in the most ordinary moments of daily life.

– ***Finally, make good use of whatever time you have.*** As Paul writes, we should always be ‘redeeming the time’ (Eph. 5:16). As far as the Teacher was concerned, the best way to redeem our time is to live in ways that honor God and use our gifts to reflect God's beauty in the world. The Teacher reminds us that there is nothing better for us than “to be joyful and to do good as long as [we] live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and find satisfaction” in our work (3:12-13).

Time is perhaps our most precious commodity, but it also happens to be one of the most difficult things to manage. We all have the same amount of time on a daily basis; the question is how we will spend it ... or whether we will waste it. This always requires deep spiritual wisdom. Even though we “cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end” (3:11), we still have decisions to make each day.

³ Excerpted from Phil Ryken. *Why Everything Matters: The Gospel in Ecclesiastes* (64)

Later the Teacher will say that ‘the wise heart’ is one that knows ‘the proper time’ (8:5). There are times in life to start something. But there are also times when something should come to an end. Knowing the difference takes wisdom, because these are some of the hardest decisions in life.

We also need wisdom for the timing of our relationships. If we want to have the heart of Jesus we need to know when it is time to ‘weep with those who weep’ or else ‘rejoice with those who rejoice.’ There are times when it is important to speak up, saying a word in season (Prov. 15:23; 25:11) or giving a reason for the hope that is in us (1 Peter 3:15). But there are also times to stop talking—times when silence is golden and it is better to hold our tongues (Prov. 27:14; James 1:26).

Redeeming the time also requires wisdom in the use of our possessions. There are times to gather and times to scatter. There are times to keep something that we may need later, but also times to cast it away for someone else to use.

If there is ‘a time for every matter under heaven’ (3:1), then redeeming the time will require wise decision-making. We must learn to ask God what time it is. Is this a time to break down or build up? Am I speaking because I want to say something, or because I really have something to say? Ask God for help, and God will give you the wisdom to know what time it is (see James 1:5). In the meantime, we are wise to pray the way the Psalmist prayed: *“Teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom”* (Psalm 90:12)

DISCUSSION

1. What are some of the most significant rites of passage and life markers that you remember from your past? What made these moments/seasons significant to you?
2. Of the 14 “times” or “seasons” found within 3:2-8, which one resonates with you most right now? Why?
3. *“Many of our frustrations rise from our blindness to the change of season or to the pain or joy of them, and we struggle to adjust our expectations.”* How do you respond to this statement? How have you experienced this frustration in your life?
4. *“Actively embracing the reality of change in advance of change can help us to adjust more readily when autumn or winter is upon us.”* If you have learned to do this, how did you learn? Who or what helped you? How can we help one another to embrace change, especially those who are struggling with it?
5. How does seeing life as seasons and cycles help us pull back from the immediate, and consider things in a longer timeframe and bigger picture? What is the value in this?
6. We are quick to insist on our own timetable, but the Teacher reminds us that God is in control and makes everything beautiful in its time. What things do you seek to control? What might it look like to surrender control, to wait for God, and to trust that God will make those things beautiful when the time comes?